Sweden is set to join NATO: What to know about the military alliance

By Niha Masih, Andrew Jeong and Ben Brasch

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Sweden is set to join NATO after Hungary's parliament voted Monday to approve its membership, ending a standoff that has lasted almost two years. NATO officials and diplomats said membership formalities could be completed by the end of the week.

The historic expansion of the military alliance — Finland also joined last year — was set in motion by Russia's war in Ukraine. Sweden and Finland both put aside years of military nonalignment to seek security within NATO after Russia's invasion in 2022. Their membership is expected to strengthen NATO's capabilities in the high north and the Baltic Sea.

NATO member countries and allies, including the United States, have provided Ukraine with more than $175 billion worth of military, financial and humanitarian aid since Russia's invasion.

WHAT TO KNOW

- What is NATO?
- Which countries are members of NATO?
- Why was Sweden's accession delayed?
- What is the status of Ukraine's NATO membership?

What is NATO?

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was formed in 1949 in the wake of World War II to bolster security in Western Europe among countries worried about Soviet advances. Experts say it remains the "pillar of U.S.-Europe military cooperation."

The alliance rests on the principle of collective defense, meaning an attack on one member is an attack on all. It has grown from its initial 12 countries, igniting debate for years over whether NATO's enlargement has stoked Russian anxiety and whether the American public is truly prepared to militarily defend every country added to the alliance's ledger.

Although NATO does not have its own armed forces, it coordinates with the militaries of member states. NATO's top defense officials have been American, while the secretary general is usually a senior European political figure. NATO's first combat mission was to enforce a no-fly zone in Bosnia in the mid-1990s. It intervened in the Kosovo War in 1999 and continues to maintain a peacekeeping force there.

After the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, NATO forces patrolled the Mediterranean Sea to secure some of the world's busiest trade routes. NATO forces also later assisted a bombing campaign in Libya that drew international condemnation for killing civilians.

Which countries are members of NATO?

NATO's founding treaty, best known as the Washington Treaty, was signed by 12 members from Europe and North America: Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Nineteen countries have joined the bloc since then, in nine rounds of expansion: Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Turkey.

Sweden will be its 32nd member. Here's a map of NATO members in Europe:

Why was Sweden's accession delayed?

To join NATO, an applicant must receive unanimous support from members. Although Sweden initially announced plans to join in May 2022, Turkey and Hungary raised objections.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan demanded Sweden do more to crack down on groups Turkey regards as terrorist entities, including the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In July last year, Erdogan obtained Stockholm's agreement to continue counterterrorism cooperation and lift an arms embargo on Turkey. He also received a pledge from the Biden administration that it would move ahead with a transfer of F-16 fighters to Turkey. Turkey's parliament ratified Sweden's NATO membership in January.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban — Russian President Vladimir Putin's closest ally in the European Union — had objected to Sweden's membership, mainly due to what he said were Swedish officials' comments about the erosion of democracy in Hungary. Hungary ended its holdout on Monday.

What is the status of Ukraine's NATO membership?

NATO member countries have been broadly supportive of Ukraine's eventual membership. But they have not offered specifics on when and under what conditions the embattled country can join — which has irked Ukrainian officials. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has described the lack of a timeline for Kyiv's membership as "unprecedented and absurd."

"Ukraine is now closer to NATO than ever before," NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said Saturday in a statement that marked the second anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. "It is not a question of if, but of when," he said of Ukraine's membership.

In July last year, President Biden told Ukrainian President Zelensky that Ukraine's accession would occur only after its war with Russia ends.

Emily Rauhala and Kareem Fahim contributed to this report.